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Jessica K Rapson

Department of Cultural and Creative Industries

King's College London, 2.02 Chesham Building, Strand, London, WC2R 2LS, UK.

Telephone: +44 (0)20 7848 7908

Email: Jessica.rapson@kcl.ac.uk

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Abstract

This article explores the contemporary mediation of memory at two plantation heritage sites on Louisiana's River Road. These sites, I argue, are systematically 'refining' cultural memories of African-American enslavement, in a metaphorical echo of the industrial processing of commodities (oil and sugar) which takes place in the same landscape. The essay draws on initial informal ethnographic fieldwork at Oak Alley (the

most visited River Road plantation) and St Joseph (a working plantation) in 2015. I identify ways in which curatorial direction, guided tours and visitor facilities at each site elide the reality of slave sugar production. The results of this fieldwork are considered in light of a range of existing literature on contested heritage and environmental criticism, enabling a provisional contextualisation of ‘refined’ memory-making within the broader socio-economic and environmental context of River Road.

Keywords

Economy, heritage, New Orleans, slavery, slow violence, whitewashing

Word Count: 7,800

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Introduction

The landscape of Louisiana's River Road, stretching from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, is a paradigm of disrupted Southern pastoral. Whilst 'the very name inspires a vision of white pillared houses standing amid lush gardens and trees dripping with Spanish moss' (Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation, 2016), 21st century River Road sees the juxtaposition of the architectural legacy of the wealthy 18th century sugar planters with petrochemical plants and poverty-stricken settlements, many of which bear the visible impact of flooding and coastal erosion. This article takes inspiration from this juxtaposition of past and present industries associated with the production of sugar and oil, and aligns these with a third pillar of the regional economy: plantation tourism. Despite the shadow of industrial plants and the ever-encroaching water line, River Road remains amongst the most prominent plantation landscapes in the American South, and visits to its houses are enduringly popular with tourists staying in nearby New Orleans. Tourism is an important source of economic income in this region, and just as sugar and oil are refined here for national and international export, so too, I argue, is a particular memory narrative. I refer to the process underscoring this narrative as a refinement of memory, which serves the needs and purposes of white Americans at the expense of representing African-American slave labour, just as the processing of commodities serves to economically and environmentally disenfranchise black communities on the River Road.

In order to unpack the process of refining memory, this article focuses on two plantations, Oak Alley—the most-visited institution on the River Road—and St Joseph, Oak Alley’s immediate neighbour and one of the most recent additions to the River Road tourist landscape. I will initially explore the ways in which memory is produced at these sites with reference to insights from existing work on plantation heritage, but the main analysis also draws on scholarship from the environmental humanities, most notably that of Rob Nixon, whose thesis on the ‘slow violence’ of environmental catastrophe provides a platform for the comparisons inferred here between past slave labour and present socio-economic marginalization. Nixon (2011: 2) defines slow violence as that which is ‘incremental and accretive’, something that occurs and destructs across an extended temporality, and is usually bereft of spectacle. The term represents a useful re-conceptualisation of what counts as violence, leading me to suggest that the past visceral violence of plantation slavery sees a continuation in the present slow violence of big oil production on the River Road.

There are existing precedents for bringing discourses of memory and the environment together, as seen in recent literary critical examinations of climate change fiction and art (see Groes 2015), and the few analyses of sites that encourage readers to think about the impact of environmental factors on the construction of visitor memories (Addis and Charlesworth 2002; Pearson 2009; Rapson 2015). Whilst such authors have examined sites with an explicitly commemorative function, Antoinette Jackson (2008)

provides a more direct precedent in examining the role of Africans in creating and preserving a unique ecosystem at Jehossee Island Rice Plantation off the coast of South Carolina, thus giving prominence to their labour. A similar intention underscores this article with a view to highlighting the lack of attention to labour at St Joseph and Oak Alley. A further influence on the approach taken here can be found in recent work on memory's relationship with broader political and material economies (Blumen and Halevi 2011; Notley and Reading 2015; Tomskey 2011). It is with these influences in mind that the first part of this essay attends both to the concept of 'refined memory' as an analytical framework for plantation tourism on River Road and to the broader landscape in which these plantations exist, with an emphasis on the environmental and socio-economic factors that shape it.

The analysis of St Joseph and Oak Alley presented here is a provisional but suggestive consideration of visitor experience which does not claim to provide any empirical evidence concerning motivation; rather, it aims to pin down the narratives presented to visitors in order to situate 'refining' as a process that plays into the nostalgic pull of the plantation (see Adams 2007: 6). As John Michael Vlach (1993: 12) emphasises, there were significant differences between owners' and slaves' experience of plantation landscapes, and the process of refinement outlined here will be shown to elide or deliberately obscure these differences. Engaging with stakeholders' motivations, I also dedicate attention to the impact of major industry investment,

specifically in the form of the American Sugar Cane League (ASCL), whose promotional video is shown at both St Joseph and Oak Alley and is analysed here to introduce many of the issues raised by these particular plantations as tourist sites, which are explored in detail in the second half of this essay. Together, these analyses lead me to argue that Oak Alley and St Joseph attempt to refine memory and accordingly naturalise slave labour. As Adams (2007: 60) has asserted, whilst ‘refineries have often become part of plantation landscapes, tours in Louisiana successfully construct their appeal along agrarian lines’. It is with a view to bringing these refineries back into the frame that an overview of River Road today as a site of economic refinement—of sugar and oil, as well as cultural memories of African-American slavery—constitutes an important part of this essay.

Refining memory

The ‘whitewashing’ of the Southern past at former slave plantations (Butler 2001) and their generally ‘white-centric’ nature (Eichstedt and Small 2002: 4) has been acknowledged and critiqued in existing scholarship, and can be understood within the larger post-plantation context outlined by Elizabeth Christine Russ (2009: 3): ‘the voices of those whose exploitation and loss were most intense under the plantation regime have, more often than not, been marginalized by the official archives of history.’

The way in which African Americans are ignored at these sites can be understood as a continuation of historically rooted racism (Shackel 2003: 2). Although attempts to correct the representational lack of attention to slavery at plantations across the South have begun to emerge in the last decade with the addition of reconstructed slave cabins, these often sanitised living facilities say little about the nature of slave experiences of sugar production. As Antoinette Jackson (2012: 49) testifies, ‘Slave cabins constitute minimal physical markers on the larger plantation landscape, typically preserved and showcased as memorials to, and testaments of, elite power.’ Similarly, Adams (2007: 63) draws attention to the fact that plantation organizers have ‘recognized the commercial possibilities, if not the social responsibility’ of slavery; as is borne out here in my analysis of Oak Alley, whilst ‘a step in the right direction’, ‘within the larger structure of plantations as tourist attractions, the “addition” of slavery takes place within a framework that continues to privilege white ownership’ (Adams 2007: 64). Julia Rose provides an illuminating account of history workers’ resistance to addressing the lack of representation of African American experience at the Magnolia Mound Plantation (another River Road attraction), demonstrating how difficult it is on the ground to challenge to dominant white memory (2016: 135-168). Perhaps the most notable institutional advances in this regard have been the inauguration of the River Road African American Museum (1994), in direct response to the exclusion of ‘enslaved Africans’ on plantation tours observed by director Kathe Hembrick (River Road

African American Museum 2017), and the opening of the commemorative and educational site at Whitney, the only plantation dedicated to commemorating the lives of slaves. With exhibits focussed on the labour that propped up the sugar industry, Whitney provides a stark contrast to other plantation sites, where ‘traditional white narratives’ continue to reinforce ‘invented southern tradition’, rendering ‘blackness and slavery peripheral’ (Rahier and Hawkins 1999: 210). As Buzinde and Santos (2008: 484) have observed, such ‘silencing’ of particular past narratives may shore up state power and hegemonic knowledge foundations in the present.

Whitewashing is a useful metaphor for the marginalization of black suffering at these plantations, but in the case of Oak Alley and St Joseph it fails to fully accommodate the precise dynamics of the mediation of memory taking place; ‘white-washing’ implies a straightforward cover-up of black experience, when this is in fact present, if highly mediated, at both these sites. I thus propose the more specific metaphor of ‘refining memory’. There are several advantages to this metaphor. Firstly, it draws attention to the nature of the labour involved in the production of sugar as a commodity, in an environment where the specificities of that labour are frequently ignored or glossed over. Secondly, whilst still describing a process of ‘making white’, the term refinement also invokes the legacy of segregation which was essential to the slave economy in the American South and elsewhere. This ‘process of creating high-purity white sugar ... is largely dictated by the need to remove colour and other non-

sucrose components. Refining is essentially a separation process, rather than a bleaching operation' (Rein 2015: 685). Finally, to suggest memories of the slavery-era past are refined also directs attention to the nature of the 'white' memories narrated, which are frequently overwhelmingly saccharine in nature. The curators of the plantations discussed here prioritise romanticised narratives of New Orleans' white gentry, alongside a commercial celebration of sugar (both in terms of domestic use and regional economic value). Memories of people of colour are relegated, as Jackson argues, to testaments of elite power (2012: 49). In the 19th century, Louisiana's slave masters, who 'defended slavery as an organic institution' (Follet 2005: 4), effectively naturalised a brutally enforced racial hierarchy. Those who manage the same sites in the 21st century risk echoing this naturalisation in the dual celebration of sugar's 'natural' goodness and the sugar elite's 'natural' position in the plantation 'big house'.

As Sidney Mintz (1986: 71) argues '[s]ugar – or rather, the great commodity market which arose demanding it – has been one of the massive demographic forces in world history'; the production and sale of sugar has played a significant role in the growth of global capitalism (1986: xxix). Of course, slaves were also valuable commodities for Southern planters, and Mintz (1986: xxiii) usefully identifies an initial separation between their labour and its resulting product:

The chemical and mechanical transformations by which substances are bent to human use and become unrecognizable by those who know them in nature have

marked our relationship to nature for almost as long as we have been human. ...

But the division of labour by which such transformations are realized can impart additional mystery to the technical processes. When the locus of manufacture and that of use are separated in time and space, where the makers and users are as little known to each other as are the processes and manufacture and use themselves, the mystery will deepen. (Mintz xxiii)

Mintz here reveals a distancing of the consumption of sugar from the violence inherent in its production; and just as production and use were temporally and spatially disassociated during the slave trade, I will suggest that, today, memories of black labour are similarly uncoupled from the commoditised product of that labour. A mystification of the power structures that governed the slave economy is part of the process of refining memory at the River Road plantations, a key 'locus of production' for sugar for over 200 years.

Slow violence and industry on River Road

Before moving on to pursue these arguments in relation to Oak Alley and St Joseph, this section highlights the slow violent impacts of processes which shape River Road as a locus of production today, in order to make sense of the background and context in which this plantation tourism takes place. It is by tracing the development of this

landscape from its antebellum origins to its present industrial status that a shift from direct to indirect violence is revealed. As mentioned in the introduction to this essay, a contemporary journey along River Road exposes a juxtaposition of bucolic and industrial scenery, as the architectural legacy of the sugar elite clashes with the spectre of petrochemical plants. As Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner (2002: 263) remark of the drive along Route 44 from Baton Rouge: ‘the landscape of pastoral towns gives way to giant industrial complexes spread out along what now becomes River Road. To the west, a huge levee hides the Mississippi River from sight and blocks river access from the desperately poor communities interspersed among the industrial plants.’ There is a statistical likelihood that many of these poor communities are primarily African American, whose residents are subject to similar forms of economic and environmental disenfranchisement suffered by black citizens of New Orleans, clearly highlighted by scholars and journalists in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (see Dyson 2015; Rivlin 2016).

As Robert Bullard has demonstrated, a decade after Katrina, whilst ‘People are talking about this economic recovery and the rebirth of clean energy and renewable energy ... what we have is energy apartheid, where poor communities ... of color are still getting the dirtiest of the dirty energy’ (in Black and Lee 2014). Adams (2007: 8-9) has furthermore convincingly situated slavery as an ongoing ‘function of law and social institutions and therefore, as a feature of U.S. culture.’ Accordingly, African-Americans

in the Southern states remain disenfranchised, as industrial and cultural conditions replicate the structural inequalities fundamental to the racist organisation and logic of plantation society.

This is not to suggest that the economy and culture of the region has remained stable. First produced in commercial quantities in the late eighteenth century (Sternberg 2013: 67), for many of the years that followed sugar was ‘the single most important crop along the River Road’, with Louisiana contributing 95 percent of total sugar production in the United States (Sternberg 2013: 70). A significant shift took place in the early 20th century, as primary land ownership along the Mississippi passed from sugar manufacturers to chemical companies (Reeves 2003: 53). 1902 saw the first major drilling for oil, with the formation of seventy-six companies in that year alone following the discovery of a significant deposit in Texas (Culbertson and Eakin: 2006: 486). Nonetheless, whilst sugar production has been overtaken, it has not declined as such; the longest grown crop in Louisiana’s history (Reeves 2003: 39), the industry today is ‘essentially the same size as ... in the 1850s’, despite the reduction in the number of physical sites of production (Reeves 2003: 45).

It is no co-incidence that sugar production now takes place ‘in the shadow’ of petrochemical facilities (Colten 2014: 64). Attracted by ‘favourable state policies that offered incentives to, and tolerated offensive practices by, industry’, petrochemical companies gradually ‘overwhelmed’ and contaminated the Mississippi. By the 1990s,

85 miles of land between Baton Rouge and New Orleans was dominated by approximately 150 petrochemical plants and refineries. This stretch became known as a 'chemical corridor', and subsequently as 'Cancer Alley': 'Studies conducted in Louisiana and throughout the country show that the poor and, in particular, poor African Americans, are more likely to live near industrial plants and are exposed to toxic pollutants at a rate much higher than more affluent whites' (Black and Lee, 2015).

The construction of petrochemical plants, responsible for significant local toxic drift in African-American residential communities over the last years of the 20th century (Markowitz and Rosner 2002), is testament to what I label the slow violence of corporate industrialisation. Whilst less visible and direct than the violence perpetrated by the slave owning 'sugar elite', it yet has concrete physical impacts on black lives and bodies. Given the emphasis on the natural goodness of refined sugar at the plantations discussed here, it is also worth noting that Louisiana was recently labelled America's 'obesity-diabetes heartland' (Griggs 2016). State health statistics suggest a significant prevalence of child obesity in rural poor areas where African-Americans constitute the most substantial demographic (Williamson et al. 2009).

The co-existence of oil and sugar cane processing industries in this landscape prompts a comparative analysis. Both ultimately take 'raw' or 'crude' materials and separate their constitutive parts in the creation of energy products which are fundamental staples of modern Western existence. Furthermore, as Craig Colten

suggests, '[e]nergy-related activities have direct ties to the natural setting where they take place'. Whilst referring primarily to petrochemical industries, these points are also relevant to the production of sugar. In the case of sugar, southern Louisiana was one of the relatively few areas with a growing season long enough to produce cane of the quality required for processing. Indeed, just as the natural environment was suited to the creation of the plantations, the protections originally put in place to safeguard sugar production from flooding—the levees—provided an additional attraction for petrochemical companies in the 20th century; the geographical proximity of the two industries is not co-incidental. However, for the purposes of this article, the significance of the parallels between these distinctive processes of energy production lies in the structural politics of disenfranchisement upon which they rely. If the original sugar industry on River Road was made viable through institutionalised racism, the oil industry today benefits from an environmental racism that echoes the brutality of its apparently pastoral counterpart. This transition from the direct physical violence encountered by the enslaved in the plantation era to the slow violence of big oil is apparent in existing literature on environmental justice, for example in Steve Lerner's (2006) examination of the toxic conditions in Diamond, LA. Diamond, a predominantly black community on the banks of the Mississippi at the opposite, Southern end of the River Road from Oak Alley and St Joseph, is overshadowed by a Shell Chemical plant and a Shell/Motavia oil refinery. Shell eventually agreed to relocate the residents, many

of whom were descended from the formerly enslaved, away from its plant in 2002 (see Lerner 2006). Finally, to turn once more to Adams' (2007: 20) work, Gulf oil pipelines named 'Plantation' and 'Colonial' suggest 'how unabashedly the rhetoric of economies linked to slavery has been reiterated'.

The environmental and socio-economic marginalisation described here provides a crucial context for this consideration of memory's refinement at sites of former slave labour; for whilst this paper largely concerns the representation of this labour in the South, it does so with a view to revealing a consistency between past and present landscape structured by racial and economic inequalities. If refining strips away impurities from commodities such as oil and sugar, I will go on to suggest that the mediation of the past at the River Road plantations aims to create a third economic commodity: palatable, refined memories of the Old South, stripped of distasteful, violent realities. Thus the refining process of segregation (and its naturalisation) cannot be seen merely as a benign hallmark of Louisiana's plantation tourism, but is in fact an insidious characteristic of the State's contemporary racial landscape.

'Making Life Sweeter, Naturally': River Road and the American Sugar Cane League

Eleven plantation sites are open to the public along the River Road (many more are privately owned and do not offer tours). Each, with the exception of Whitney, attracts visitors in both general and specific terms: all offer an escape from contemporary life in the pastoral splendour of the antebellum South, but beyond this, each claims distinction for a particular unique quality. Amongst these Oak Alley is promoted as ‘The Deep South’s Most Spectacular Antebellum Setting’, a reference to the alley of live oaks leading to the entrance which have come to represent plantation landscapes in the popular imaginary, in part as a result of the inclusion of the property as a setting in a wide range of television and film production. The first plantation house to open to the public in the area, in 1998, Oak Alley offers the broadest range of services on River Road: in addition to the tours (led by costumed guides in the house, self-guided in the grounds), Oak Alley also features reconstructed slave huts, an interactive Civil War Encampment exhibit, an original blacksmith’s forge, a Creole/Cajun restaurant and separate cafe and ice cream parlour, a bar, a gift shop, cottages for overnight stays and a full service for weddings and events. The slavery exhibit, opened in 2013, is the newest addition.

St Joseph, advertised to visitors as ‘The River Road’s newest attraction’ (inaccurate since the opening of Whitney in 2015), is next door to Oak Alley, and is a very different operation in scale and provision. With its self-appointed status as the Road’s only working plantation open to the public (although this is also true of

Evergreen), the original family still owns and runs both house and agricultural business. Tours are provided by family members or their friends and the gift shop sells locally made crafts and produce. St Joseph, like Oak Alley, can be booked for events and weddings, but without accommodation or dining facilities. The family also own and live at the neighbouring plantation, Felicite, visible through the trees at the edge of St Joseph; although not currently open to the public, Felicite has taken centre stage in recent popular representations of slavery as a backdrop in *12 Years a Slave* (2013). Also visible from the property are the sugar cane fields farmed by the family (not included in the tour).

ASCL's promotional video 'Raising Cane in Louisiana' (2014) is featured at both St Joseph and Oak Alley (where it is shown in a barn behind the main house). The video opens with the sun rising over sugar cane fields, to strains of Southern blues guitar. The narrator introduces the sugar industry and invites the viewer to 'squint': 'and the fields look much as they must have appeared then.' He describes the new technology, better refining processes and disease resistant plants that contributed to the industry's success. That the production process has changed significantly is repeated several times in the summary that follows, but beyond a very brief display of sepia-toned photographic pastoral images, such as one of a man with a horse and cart, there is no mention or imagery of original production processes. The focus of the video is on the technical basics of sugar cane growth and refining processes, contemporary

developments, and the positive economic impact of sugar for the region; according to the narrator sugar is:

vital to Louisiana's economy – with an annual economic impact of \$2.2 billion ... while also generating an overall economic value of \$3.5 billion. Sugarcane is produced on more than 400,000 acres of land in 22 Louisiana parishes – with production of approximately 13 million tons of cane yearly.

The League's summary of sugar's significance to the state concludes with the statement that 'sugarcane production and processing is ... a treasured way of life for hundreds of farming families in our state.' Finally, the narrator moves from the regional production process to national consumption:

This pure and natural Louisiana sugar is palletised and shipped throughout the nation. Many people enjoy sugar on a daily basis, and you can continue to enjoy it because most of the myths about sugar consumption don't tolerate scientific scrutiny. Sugar doesn't cause diabetes, obesity or hyperactivity. In fact, sugar has been found to be essential to normal brain activity. There is no substitute for real sugar. So at only 15 calories per teaspoon, feel free to indulge in sugar's healthy benefits.

Clearly the promotion of sugar as natural and thus healthy ignores the obvious fact that eating *too much* sugar is at the root of a range of serious health problems in the US, not

least, as noted above, in Louisiana. Medical research suggests that most US adults consume more sugar than is recommended by dietary professionals and stress a significant link between this and mortality by cardiovascular disease (Yang et al. 2014).

The brief mention of the origin of the industry that follows similarly elides any mention of slavery, despite the obvious fact that slave labour made the industry so successful. Viewers learn that sugar has been produced in New Orleans for over 200 years, ‘and has come a long way since then’, glossing over the nature of the transitions that took place. The question of *how* Louisiana sugar has come such a long way—on whose labour it has relied and the nature of that labour—is not addressed by the ASCL. In fact, the origins of the industry can be traced to Audubon Park, north of New Orleans, home to sugar planter Etienne De Boré. De Boré pioneered methods of refinement in the 1790s so successfully that by 1801 more than seventy-five operations in the region were following his example, resulting in the production of four hundred thousand dollars worth of product. De Boré’s operation was dependant on a large workforce of slaves (Culbertson and Eakin 2006). The profitability of this operation contributed to the growth in Louisiana’s slave population from 19,926 to 331,726 by 1860 (see Whitneyplantation.org 2015). The connection between the growth of the sugar economy and the expansion of plantation slavery is abundantly clear but completely absent from the ASCL narrative.

In the final section, for the second time in the video, the camera shows an image of the past; another sepia photograph of the cane fields, and one of a crane on the banks of the Mississippi. As in the earlier images, it is not possible to determine the skin colour of the figures working in the fields. The narrator continues, with a naturalising rhetoric that underscores the tone of the video as a whole:

Louisiana sugar and the products it is used in have been an important, and delicious, part of our lives, all of our lives. Like the sun rises and sets, sugar is something Louisiana has come to depend on, and love.

An American flag blows in the breeze above the cane field, and in beginning and ending the video with the rising and setting of the sun, the naturalisation (and nationalisation) of the process of sugar production is almost complete. The narrator ends with a statement that firmly associates sugar's properties with a healthy lifestyle and positive values: 'It's natural, it's healthy, it's good.'

The video closes with further images of sugar cane fields to the soundtrack of 'Sweet Sugar Cane' (2012), by Florida group Smithfield Fair. The song fades out before the end but most of the first two verses are audible:

Sugar cane – sweet sugar cane,
The sweetness of our southern dreams.
Sugar cane – sweet sugar cane,

And fireflies in the jasmine-scented breeze.

There's a little shade beneath this tree

That shields me from relentless heat;

An afternoon shower possibly...

Thus the video leaves viewers to contemplate sugar's important role in creating a (specifically Southern) American dream against a pastoral backdrop in which the fierce heat of Louisiana is made palatable by a fragrant breeze, the shelter of a handy tree and a light sprinkling of rain. In fact, in this region, 'acclimated' or 'especially dark slaves' were popular with plantation owners due to the 'loss by death in bringing slaves from a Northern climate' (Pargas 2014: 123). Such historical realities are unpalatable for the ACLS vision of sugar production, as are the risks of consuming too much sugar. Production processes are domesticated, gentrified, romanticised, nationalised and naturalised. Much the same can be said of the memories of antebellum sugar production at the plantation sites which screen it, albeit in rather different ways.

'Grande Dame of the Great River Road': Oak Alley

Tours of the big house at Oak Alley start at regular intervals. Visitors are introduced to the house as an outcome of a love story, when the romantic figure of Jacques

Telesphore Roman III built the plantation to ‘lure’ his wife Celina (Marie Thérèse Celina Josephine Pilie) from her busy social life in New Orleans. The building itself is referred to as ‘she’, in line with the promotional rhetoric of Oak Alley as River Road’s ‘Grande Dame’. Tours start on the ground floor reception rooms where information is offered about the construction of the building and white domestic life. References to slave labour are limited to particularly notably skilled cooks and gardeners, whose achievements are mentioned several times. The guide’s description of the first owners’ occupation and way of life is remarkable for the use of phrasing that encourages visitors to engage on a personal level: It was ‘just like today’, and the owners were ‘just like us’. This rhetoric is one of the naturalising aspects of the site, as visitors are encouraged to empathise with the daily lives of slave owners with scarce attention to the labour required to maintain their lifestyles. Indeed there is a distinct emphasis on the wealth and the conspicuous consumption of the original owners, with the patriarch Roman described as ‘King Louis 14th of Louisiana’, evoking memories of the French monarch’s construction of the extravagant Palace at Versailles.

Jacques Roman is also presented as the romantic protagonist of Oak Alley’s drama, a tall man who apparently ‘looked like Elvis’ (or, as the guide put it, ‘my kinda man’). His death from tuberculosis leaves the tragic figure of widow Celina, left to manage the plantation alone after bravely confronting the financial impact of the civil war (although historical accounts suggest her excessive spending was fundamental to its

bankruptcy in the 1850s, when financial management was taken over by her son Henry – see Southall 2015). On the upstairs floor, the guide introduces the melancholy fate of Celina and Jacques Roman's daughter, Louise, whose leg was amputated after she sustained an accidental fall and who subsequently became a Carmelite nun. Following Celina's death (white Southern mourning customs are a prominent theme on this tour, as they are at St Joseph) and the abolition of slavery, visitors learn that animals took over the plantation, causing substantial damage to the building.

In sum, the narrative of the guided tour constitutes a tragic love story, whose protagonists are plagued with bad luck (the civil war, financial disaster, the amputation of Louise's leg, the abolition of slavery). As one history of plantation homes and families concludes: 'As a result [of] determined adherence to the Southern Cause, the once great fortune of the entire Roman clan was swept away' (de Bachellet Seebold 1941: 182). According to the Oak Alley tour guide, the same was true of the graves of the family, which were swept away by a flood, a tragic end to their empire. Ultimately the tour exculpates the owners from culpability, presenting poor management as ill-fate and slave ownership as a neutral and normalised fact of life which provided opportunities for the most promising black individuals to cultivate their skills and thus contribute to the genteel luxury of plantation aesthetics and the lifestyle of the sugar elites. The apex of the tour is the famous view of the alley of live oaks leading to the levees in the distance. Flinging open the doors to the 1st floor balcony, guides welcome

groups to 'The bit you'll never forget'; a confirmation of the privileging of the gaze of slave-owners over slaves and the aesthetic consequences of labour, rather than labour in itself. The tour concludes with a small bar offering mint juleps or lemonade, giving visitors the opportunity to consume some material sugar to complement the saccharine, refined narrative of memories of the big house.

Despite the elision of the black labour fundamental to sugar production in the house tour, 'Slavery at Oak Alley' is the explicit focus of the cabin exhibits situated along an alley on the left-hand side of the main house. This is the next logical step on a route around the site, which explains the rather unsettling sight of tourists sipping mint juleps from branded Oak Alley cups as they wander through the exhibition. Signage acknowledges Oak Alley as 'firmly embedded in its history as a sugar plantation and consequently in slavery, and the aim of 'bringing the life, work and identity of those who were enslaved here into focus', to 'look to bring truthfulness and clarity to the full story' of the plantation. Completed in 2013, the exhibit comprises 6 cabins containing exhibits such as 'Status: the Quarters of a House Slave', 'Women's Work', 'Crime and Punishment', 'Building Techniques' and 'Grafting' (referring to the grafting of fruit trees). Prominent figures represented include Dr Casimir Merricq from nearby St Joseph, who was paid to perform amputations when slaves were injured on the plantations, and favoured slaves Zephyr (for whom Roman filed for manumission), and Antoine, 'the enslaved gardener'. Antoine's story is deemed significant, as he was lent

to an associate of Roman's to conduct experiments with pecan trees with the aim of cultivating a variety with thin-shelled nuts for commercial production. Visitors are told that 'Antoine succeeded [...] Jacques took great pride in his orchard, but it was [sic] Antoine's achievement we remember today.' As in the house tour, the focus is frequently on particularly skilled slaves who occupied an unusually privileged status.

One of the cabins contains a commemorative space, with a wall of names introduced as follows:

Between 1836 and the Civil War, 198 men, women and children were enslaved at Oak Alley. Dehumanised and quantified like any other commodity, they appear in sales records and inventories, yes as people they have all but been forgotten by history.

This is a respectful recognition of the people on whose backs this plantation was built. For most of them, a name is all that remains of their story.

This acknowledgement of slavery as morally problematic is crucial and welcome, certainly 'a step in the right direction' (see Adams 2007: 63), yet sits uncomfortably in this context. Dehumanisation is recorded but not attributed to the plantation owners; from entering the house to concluding the slave cabin exhibit the main 'facts' visitors learn about Roman are his romantic and family-centric nature, luxurious taste, good looks, generosity in paying for medical treatment, his freeing of one slave, and pride in

the horticultural achievements of another. As such, the exhibit functions in line with Adams' (2007: 60) and Jackson's (2012: 49) aforementioned critiques. The structure of the site physically separates black and white memories of the antebellum period, obscuring the fact that the lives of slaves and their owners were not mutually exclusive. As far as the production of sugar as commodity is concerned, it is notable that 'Slavery at Oak Alley' provides as much information about grafting trees (ornamental pecans grace the lawn) as about the cultivation and refinement of sugar cane. This aspect of the site is more-or-less relegated to the ASCL video, and the full provision of sugar cane related gifts in the Oak Alley shop. A large semi-circular vat of the type used to boil sugar is displayed prominently in the grounds, but as this has been converted into a planter for water lilies its original function is obfuscated.

It is not the merely the exhibit and house that consolidate the disconnection between the lifestyles of the 'sugar elite' and slave labour. At the end of the cabin visitors arrive at a courtyard area with entrances to the restaurant, rest rooms, bed and breakfast check in and 'spirit bar' ('free shots!'). These appendages continue the process of refinement by separating and ultimately compartmentalising slave memory, resulting in a site apparently uncontaminated by troubling moral questions.

‘A Louisiana Family Owned Sugar Plantation’: St Joseph

The refining of memory is also in process next door at St Joseph. If Oak Alley naturalises the decoupling of white sugar elite lifestyle and black slave labour via selective narrative and landscaping, St Joseph manage this aspect of the past by simultaneously acknowledging and revising it. My tour guide was a direct descendent of the French family who have owned the site since it was purchased in a post-Civil war sale by patriarch, Joseph Waguespack. Accordingly, the tour began with history of the French in Louisiana. As the plantation website explains, ‘while the plantation was a participant in antebellum slavery, the owners do not wish to hide from its history’. Acknowledgement that the house was built by slaves is almost immediate. Extensive details are provided about the design features and materials, including which are original and which were added later. Two films are then screened, one a media feature documenting the filming of *12 Years a Slave* (2013) at Felicite (suggesting that the owners here have indeed ‘recognized the commercial possibilities’ of slavery, see Adams cited above), followed by the ASCL film (which is introduced as a resource to enable visitors understand the house better). The tour of the house that follows lacks the simplistic narrative of Oak Alley, as ante- and post-bellum timelines and genealogies come together, both in the stories told and the range of objects presented. The invitation to ‘imagine this is your grandfather’s’ house’ emphasises that the displays are the result of inter-generational family decisions about what to keep, but this phrasing also

suggests the same rhetorical approach taken at Oak Alley, where a call to identify with owners (who were ‘just like us’) rather than slaves was also evident.

There is again some focus on particularly skilled plantation slaves, who had been ‘trained in their native Caribbean’ to undertake decorative building work in high temperatures. Rather than a primary focus on one generation of owners, here the guide covers the intermingled genealogy of neighbouring plantation families (including Oak Alley). This is a depiction of ‘a small town where you marry your friends, and eventually you get cousins from here to there.’ Again, there is a prominent focus on white Southern mourning customs, with additional emphasis on how difficult life was for the women of Southern homes at this time (the dangers and discomfort of childbirth, the unwieldiness of mourning costume). As Adams (2007: 57) has suggested, on plantation tours, ‘Whites become the real labourers in a slave society, and they suffer as they claimed slaves never did.’ (See also Eichstedt and Small 2002: 260). In comparison to the uncomfortable lives of St Joseph white female residents, slaves apparently fared well, because healthy slaves made ‘good business sense’. This is explained through a comparison of slaves with cars. A slave would cost roughly the same as a new car today, and, just as one wouldn’t ‘trash’ a new car, the owners would not have ‘trashed’ slaves. This narrative is emphasised again via some time resident Dr. Merricq who was charged with their ‘care’. ‘For the most part a lot of what you hear about beatings, etc., was Hollywood’ (presumably a nod to *12 Years*); ‘you don’t hear about the fair slave

owners'. The lives of slaves were thus 'no different' from those of poor people elsewhere in the US then and now; 'bad owners' were 'one-offs'. That the 'the real problem of slavery was not their daily lives' is emphasised in comments that the 93 slaves in 1860 lived in relatively comfortable quarters and were not expected to work in heat of the day. If 'undernourishment, harsh punishment, inadequate housing' and shortened life-spans characterised sugar plantation slavery in the South (McDonald 2003: 488), visitors are unlikely to glean as much from St Joseph today.

There is an emphasis too on the historically egalitarian qualities of Louisiana in comparison to other states, for example that free black men in the region also owned slaves, and many African Americans had originally been enslaved by (black) Africans. That slavery continues today in many parts of the world is also stressed. In fact, slavery is given detailed treatment on the tour in comparison to Oak Alley. Furthermore, after the Civil War, we are told (ignoring realities such as Jim Crow) there was little difference between whites and blacks in this region, as they were all poor victims of carpet baggers and scallywags, paid in tokens for agricultural labour so all money could be spent rejuvenating the sugar industry. St Joseph's current status as a working plantation as well as a tourist attraction, where labour is undertaken by both white and black workers (a point mentioned by the guide), further seems to imply a *continuing* equality between races which may or may not be the case today but which was certainly not the case in the antebellum period. St Joseph's current contribution to the Louisiana

sugar economy is also reflected in thorough contextualisation of this commodity as a major part of current local industry alongside oil (with mention that between half and two thirds of US oil is shipped through ports in Mississippi) and cotton.

The tour finishes outside the house on the back lawn (rented out annually as a location for balls for students from 'Ole Miss'). There are two re-constructed slave cabins on a lawn to the left of the house, but as they currently contain no exhibits they are not included on the tour (perhaps a nod to the possibility of a commercial appeal yet to be fully explored). The normalisation of slave ownership that characterises a visit here undermines the guide's repeated phrase assertion that 'we cannot defend slavery, it is indefensible'.

The refinement of memory here is as comprehensive at Oak Alley, but is rendered through a different narrative, one which acknowledges slavery only to attempt the cleansing of an unpalatable history. This cleansing is in part achieved by the aligning of violent aspects of slavery with 'Hollywood', and thus with fantasy or fiction, firmly located outside the boundaries of St Joseph, echoing the segregation of black and white memory at Oak Alley. The guide recommends that visitors who wish to learn about slavery take a tour at Whitney. Whitney represents a significant achievement in acknowledging slave labour as fundamental to the production of sugar and lifestyle of the sugar elite, and will no doubt receive scholarly discussion in its own right which cannot be accommodated here. However, the memorial now provides a space for slave

memory, which, certainly from the perspective of my guide at St Joseph, legitimises the lack of focus on its violent reality at the other plantations. 34,000 visitors went to Whitney in its first year, a considerable number but with a long way to reach Oak Alley's total of approximately 5 million at the time of my visit.

Conclusion

This analysis has suggested that the representational strategies and narratives of plantations such as Oak Alley and St Joseph segregate white and black lives and memories, resulting in a highly refined mediation of antebellum memory. The ways in which these sites represent sugar production thus continue to marginalise African-American life on Louisiana's River Road whilst simultaneously 'valorizing' white owners (see Eichstedt and Small 2002: 147). This revision of history takes place against a backdrop of slow violence which has been traced here to the larger industrial context of production on the River Road, replacing the direct physical violence of former antebellum slavery. Furthermore, the refining of memory encouraged by curatorial strategies functions (wittingly or unwittingly) to complement and extend the narrative of the ASCL as stakeholder. The myth that refined sugar is healthy relies to some extent on misleading usage of the word 'pure'; as John Yudkin (2012: 54)—the scientist at the forefront of attempts to alert the public to the dangers of sugar consumption—has noted,

one might easily ‘carry over’ the association of chemical purity with ‘wholesomeness’, and thus something ultimately ‘beneficial’. Yudkins’ analysis (2012: 28, 54) suggests that terms such as ‘natural’ or ‘pure’ (used so liberally in the ASCL promotional video) are completely inappropriate to discussions of sugar, refined or unrefined, as far as its nutritional benefits are concerned.

How is this significant to the analysis of the two sites discussed here? Certainly the ASCL video shown at both employs misleading terms in order to promote its product as healthy for economic gain, and in doing so fuels a form of metabolic slow violence prevalent in Louisiana today. But, furthermore, the manipulation of meaning at stake in the sugar industry’s (mis)use of language echoes the strategic re-writing of history taking place at the sites overall. In both cases, false associations are made: sugar is natural, refined sugar is pure; slavery was the natural order, whiteness is refined. At Oak Alley and St Jospeh, the narrative strategies employed strip away the realities of slavery, making unpalatable truths palatable for predominantly white visitors. The existence of slavery *per se* is not denied, but its centrality to the prosperity and ‘civilisation’ of white America is de-emphasised.

In concluding, I return to the example of Whitney, because its inauguration represents a happy amalgamation of the several factors I have brought together in this analysis of River Road, most prominently the intimate connection between the representations of the sugar planting past and the economic and industrial landscapes of

the present day. Whitney is not only unique in its focus on slave experience, it also represents an unusual triumph of environmentalism over industry. In 1999, the land where the memorial now stands was owned by the petrochemical company Formosa, whose plans to construct a \$700m plant for the manufacture of rayon came to nothing after a sustained protest by environmental and preservationist groups. The site went up for sale and was purchased by white lawyer John Cummings, who went on to re-construct Whitney as the US's first memorial to slavery. David Amsden's (2015) report of Formosa's early efforts at 'appeasement', reveal that the company:

commissioned an exhaustive survey of the grounds, with the idea that the most historic sections would be turned into a token museum of Creole culture while a majority of the rest would be razed to make way for the factory. In the end, it was wasted money and effort: The opposition remained vigilant, rayon was going out of fashion, the Whitney went back on the market and Cummings inherited the eight-volume study with the purchase.

As a result, Formosa, instead of adding yet another factory to Cancer Alley's landscape, unwittingly made a significant contribution to Cummings' project, because he benefitted from their initial research into the site: 'Thanks to Formosa, I knew more about my plantation than anyone else around here — maybe more than any plantation in America ... A lot of what was in there was about the architecture and artifacts, but you started to see the story of slavery' (Cummings in Amsden 2015).

Whitney's inauguration, like the juxtaposition of industrial petrochemical plants and pastoral plantation estates along the River Road, is a reminder of tangled but enduring intimacies that shape this landscape, linking past and present suffering, labour and loss. This article has suggested that memory joins sugar and oil as a key commodity in this landscape where the heritage industry serves the demands of the present in much the same way as sugar once served the lifestyles of the antebellum sugar elite. This is a landscape that demands recognition of the materialities which not only structure memory, but also naturalise the economic and environmental hierarchies that organise life and death.

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Biography:

Jessica Rapson is a lecturer in the Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries at King's College London. She is the author of *Topographies of Suffering: Buchenwald, Babi Yar, Lidice* (Berghahn 2015) and several published essays on commemorative landscapes. She is the co-editor (with Lucy Bond) of *The Transcultural Turn:*

Interrogating memory between and Beyond Borders (de Gruyter 2014) and (with Ben de Bruyn and Lucy Bond), a special issue of *Textual Practice* on ‘Planetary Memory in Contemporary US Fiction’ (2017).